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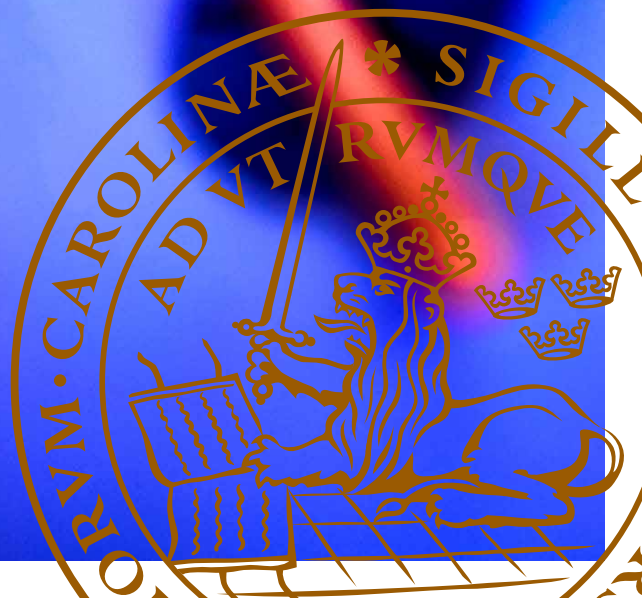
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POLICY BRIEF
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How new universities can spur innovation and development in non-core regions

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How new universities can spur innovation and development in non-core regions

For policy makers interested in driving regional innovation and development by establishing new universities, it is important to recognize the complexity and path dependent nature of the process. Regional engagement of new universities is a balancing act between top-down policy goals and their national and global aspirations. At the micro-level, the role of individual faculty and their motivations and logics need to be considered.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Developing a regional innovation system and knowledge economy through universities does not happen automatically: there are evolutionary and complex processes and rationales at play that need to be understood if we are to create effective policy in this regard.

Research and innovation, as key components of the knowledge economy, tend to agglomerate in core regions, making it hard for policy makers to stimulate regional development in non-core regions that usually lag behind their core counterparts in economic terms.

Several national and local governments have attempted to replicate the well-known models, such as the Silicon Valley model from the US, to non-core regions albeit with varied outcomes. Given the central role of universities in regional innovation and development, governments have undertaken higher education reforms and made investments to establish new universities in non-core regions that did not previously host them.

However, just establishing new universities is not sufficient. We lack an understanding about how new universities develop collaborations with regional actors, and the role of policy in supporting this. Much of what we know about university-region relationships are from Global North or on established university settings, which may be hard to replicate in developing countries and for new universities.

Further, the individual actions and motivations of faculty members that underpin university–region engagements remain inside a ‘black box’ and need to be unpacked. We studied this under-research field through case studies of new universities in non-core–rural and semi-rural–regions in India.

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR POLICY

The study indicates varied approaches and rationales for establishment of new universities in non-core regions, which can offer insights for effective higher education and regional policy implementation.

- Policies for stimulating regional innovation and development through new universities need to consider the aspirations of the universities and those of the regions, and how well aligned these are.
- Government initiatives to establish new universities in non-core areas need to collaborate with regional actors to set agendas and deciding the nature of universities to be set up. This can ensure effective integration of new universities with the region and align with its specific needs and the universities’ expertise.
- Adequate autonomy needs to be given to new universities to develop their identity through recruitment of diverse faculty and staff, also from outside the region. This can be strategically beneficial for the region, and helping to assimilate knowledge from elsewhere to non-core regions.
- The government can play a pivotal role as a facilitator of partnership between the region and the university to legitimize the partnerships.
- Prior legitimacy of institutes and academics can prove to be a key factor in acceptance of new universities within the region. Non-core regions, as hosts, can pride themselves on having a university and support growth of new universities; universities, as newcomers to the region, can feel a sense of responsibility to give back in return.

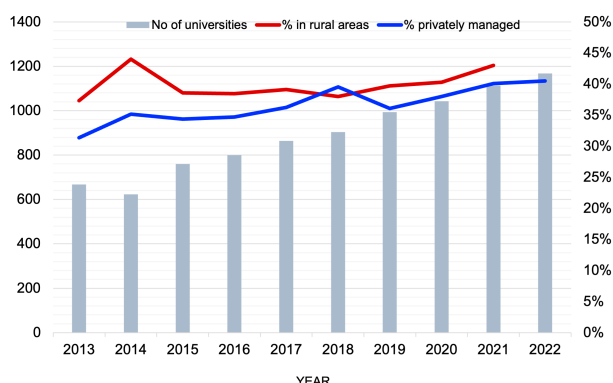


Figure 1: Growth in universities in India

UNIVERSITY-REGION COLLABORATIONS IN SEMI-URBAN INDIA, A STUDY

We lack a framework for understanding university-region collaborations when it comes to new universities in non-core regions, and in developing economy settings. As such, we needed to build up theory around this topic from the ground up. We did this by conducting exploratory case studies in six new Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India located in rural and semi-urban regions. India has seen a steady increase in number of universities.

First, we find that the development trajectory of new universities is path dependent, embedded within national higher education systems and policies, and institutional norms and regulations. Therefore, new pathways need to be established and activated between the university and regional actors through multiple routes and rationales. This can lead to mutual development of the university and the region.

Our study separated the wide topic of university-region collaborations into two areas for analysis: the routes for establishing new collaborations at the regional level, and the rationales and motivations behind these.



Routes for Establishing New Regional Collaborations

- **Personal Routes:** Faculty members or staff establish novel connections through personal channels, driven by potential benefits to their research and teaching, as well as alignment with their performance evaluation criteria. However, in the case of new universities, they often lack the expertise to effectively engage with regional actors, necessitating skills beyond those related to research and teaching, especially during earlier career phases.
- **Organizational Routes:** Creating alliances with local governments and regional actors allows for formal projects with the potential for mutual benefits. The ambitions and excitement of leaders of new universities and their (perceived) status in non-core regions, works as key stimuli for initiating new collaborations.
- **Brokered Routes:** University-regional actors generate ties facilitated by governmental intervention to assist HEIs in establishing legitimacy with regional stakeholders and enabling greater autonomy. Brokered routes especially have the potential to unlock opportunities and resources needed for collaborations that new universities often lack.

The Rationales behind University-Region Collaborative Development

- **Entrepreneurialism:** Establishing a new university in a non-core region benefits from less baggage related to politics and historical burdens, and significantly higher flexibility to try new things and implement changes.
- **Social Responsibility:** Employees of HEIs feel privileged to work in a nationally recognized institute and feel responsibility to contribute back to the region in return.
- **Legitimization:** Strengthening regional ties is a strategic move by HEIs to gain public and regulatory legitimacy. The legitimacy is important for new HEIs for their growth including starting new programs and attracting students and faculty.
- **Rationalization:** Both the region and the new universities make rational choices in developing ties, with economic benefits such as job creation, human capital development, and regional innovation being key considerations for the collaborations. Additionally, the HEIs unlock funding opportunities by co-creating programs with and for the region.

A Public University in a Non-core Region in India.
Photo: Adarsh Patel, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons
(cropped from original)

KEY POINTS FOR POLICY

- Shaped by the enthusiasm of building something new, young faculty members of new universities can build new ties in non-core regions, for potential gains to their research and teaching.
- It is equally critical to consider how the region can benefit new universities in developing their niche and being competitive, as it is to consider how universities can contribute to the region's innovation and development. Benefits for new universities of aligning their focus and priorities with regional strengths include financial gains, development of novel research projects and access to data for conducting research.
- New universities, in their early years, can integrate the region into their activities to deliver on policy mandates and gain legitimacy, while in later years making the region a relational domain that is integrated with their core research and teaching missions, as is the case for engaged universities.
- The nature of initial support provided to new universities (e.g., funding, land and mentoring), autonomy of the universities, and the infrastructure and social support available at the regional level, can influence the evolutionary path of how new universities develop in non-core regions.
- The development of new universities in non-core regions can also be characterized by their reputation, identity, and dynamics of national and international competitiveness.

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PUBLICATIONS

For more information read the full articles:

Debananda Misra & Rhiannon Pugh (2023) Developing non-core regions by establishing new universities, *Regional Studies*, 57(12), 2563-2577 [DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2180457](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2180457)

Debananda Misra (2020) A path-dependent analysis of the effect of location on the development of new universities. *High Educ* 80, 289–304. [DOI: 10.1007/s10734-019-00480-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00480-7)

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